Re-framing the Analysis: A 3-Dimensional Perspective of Prisoners' Children's Well-Being.

This article highlights three dimensions to understanding children's well-being during and after parental imprisonment which have not been fully explored in current research. A consideration of 'time' reveals the importance of children's past experiences and their anticipated futures. A focus on 'space' highlights the impact of new or altered environmental dynamics. A study of 'agency' illuminates how children cope within structural, material and social confines which intensify vulnerability and dependency. This integrated perspective reveals important differences in individual children's experiences and commonalities in broader systemic and social constraints on prisoners' children collectively. The paper analyses data from a prospective longitudinal study of 35 prisoners' children during and after their (step)father's imprisonment to illustrate the arguments.

Introduction

Numbers of children affected by parental imprisonment in England and Wales have increased significantly over the past decade. In 2003 it was estimated that 160,000 children experienced the imprisonment of a parent at some point during the year (Department for Children, Schools and Families and Ministry of Justice, 2007). By 2009 this figure had grown by 25% to 200,000 children (Williams and others, 2012). In the US where incarceration rates are the highest in the world (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2013) numbers of children with a parent in prison are estimated at 2.7 million (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). For a long time there was little awareness of the problems many

prisoners' children faced and for this reason they have been referred to as 'hidden' or 'silent victims' of crime (Drash, 2012, Williams, 2013). However in the UK and US in parallel with the rise in incarceration rates, increasing research attention has been directed towards this group of young people with the aim of understanding the consequences of having a parent in prison (Wilderman, 2009, Authors' Own, Manby, 2012).

Such research has consistently found that parental imprisonment is associated with negative outcomes for children and young people: depression and anxiety (Murray and Murray, 2010) bullying and stigma (Boswell and Wedge, 2002) behavioural problems (Murray and others, 2012a; 2012b), lower social mobility (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010) and criminal justice convictions (Besemer and others, 2011). It can disrupt family relationships (McDermott and King, 1992; Noble, 1995) and aggravate material and social problems for families (Smith and others, 2007, Codd, 2008).

Underpinning many of these studies is a concern for the well-being of prisoners' children, yet the concept is largely defined by its absence or decline; the analysis is of 'risk factors' or 'negative outcomes' (Poehlmann, 2005, Geller and others, 2009). There is less research on positive or protective factors of well-being, although this is now beginning to be addressed through the study of resilience and coping (e.g. Manby, 2012). Hissel and others' (2011) study of children with mothers in prison described child well-being as *'a broad term encompassing how the child experiences his/her life in various social domains'* (p.349). Their study found overall decreased levels of well-being associated with their mother's imprisonment but there were also indications that some children's

problems existed beforehand and a small minority of children said their situation was better than before.

These findings illustrate how parental imprisonment generates its own set of influences and how child well-being is a multi-faceted concept that requires a nuanced understanding (see also Ben-Arieh, 2008, Amerijckx and Humblet, 2013). The aim of this paper is to present an analytical framework which facilitates such understanding in relation to prisoners' children. It first discusses potentially illuminating theoretical insights from wider social science research on well-being and childhood which remain largely unexplored in studies of prisoners' children. Second, it considers the relevance of three dimensions of well-being highlighted in the literature (time, space and agency) for understanding the experiences of prisoners' children, drawing on qualitative data from 35 children whose father was in prison. Finally it illustrates how these dimensions might be integrated into an analytical framework which facilitates a fuller account of prisoners' children's well-being than currently exists.

1 Well-Being

Well-being has been defined in relation to a wide range of physical, psychological, social, and economic criteria (Pollard and Lee, 2003). It has been presented as a framework of external objective social, economic and environmental indicators (see for example, OECD, 2013) and as an internal subjective construct, measuring feelings of happiness *(hedonia)* and life satisfaction or self-realisation *(eudaimonia)* (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Ben-Arieh (2008) notes the change in direction away from future oriented perspectives of

child well-being in terms of development and socialisation and towards a focus on children's experiences of the present (see for example, UNICEF 2013). These measures aim to represent in various forms the children's own views.

External and internal measures have their limitations on their own: external measures of well-being such as of wealth or the quality of environmental conditions cannot measure subjective experience such as happiness or life satisfaction. However a subjective perspective may reflect an adaptive preference to a 'second class status' (Sen, 1995) or to unfavourable conditions such as poverty (Ziegler, 2010). Recent frameworks for measuring well-being have therefore adopted a multi- disciplinary approach taking into account in different ways both external and internal measures of well-being (for example, UN, 2013).

1.1 Well-being and Time

Well-being can fluctuate over time (Durayappah, 2010). It can be affected by particular events (Kim-Prieto and others, 2013) and change with the 'flow' of experience and related emotions (Brandstätter, 1994). For most prisoners' children, the experience of parental imprisonment is a temporary phenomenon; there will have been a time 'before' and a time 'after' and possible corresponding changes to their well-being. Their happiness in the present will depend in part on their previous experiences. How children anticipate the time when the parent is released will also be relevant (Lollis, 2003). For some, the current changes in their lives may make the future less easy to predict (Schutz, 1970) and uncertainty may generate anxiety. Others may however derive comfort from the prospect of a future in which life will return to

how it was in the past. Thus knowledge of past experiences and anticipated futures, particularly with regard to the relationship with the parent in prison is likely to be important for understanding the impact of parental imprisonment on children's well-being in the present.

1.2 Well-Being and Space

Morrison (2011) and Brereton and others (2008) illustrate on a large scale how living space has an influence on subjective well-being. Brereton and others (2008) found that the explanatory power of their happiness measures was increased three fold by a consideration of the spaces people frequented and concluded the '*critical importance of the spatial dimensions for well-being*' (p.5). Homel and Burns (1987) illustrate the importance of the street, the neighbourhood and the home for understanding the emotional and social well-being of children. They suggest that both physical and social characteristics of the environments are influential. Of relevance too is the permeability of spaces to outside influences. Holloway and Valentine (2000) discuss the notion of a 'porous space' which is not fully bounded, but which is influenced by the outside world. Children's well-being in familiar spaces where the parent is now physically absent and where others have learnt of the imprisonment may be altered for this reason.

1.3 Well-Being and Agency

Acknowledgement of children's agency has been a core principle underpinning the 'new sociology of childhood' (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). Researchers in this field have brought to the fore the role of children as social

actors of the present (Qvortrup,1990). They have argued against a welfare oriented representation of children as passive subjects, such as might be suggested by references to 'hidden' or 'silent victims', for this masks the role that children play in actively constructing their worlds (Katz 2013, Oswell, 2013). Moreover research which has collected children's views has found that a sense of agency can be intrinsic to their well-being (Fattore and others, 2007). Nevertheless there are limits to children's agency. It is bounded by the structural constraints of childhood and the controlling practices of spaces children frequent (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). These limitations may place children in positions of vulnerability and heighten their dependency on others. How they are able exercise their agency within such constraints will be relevant to understanding their well-being.

2 Research Sample and Method

The research on which this paper is based was a prospective longitudinal study of 40 families in England (40 fathers, 40 mothers and 69 children) who experienced the imprisonment of the father. The families comprised fathers, mothers (the father's partners or ex-partners) and their biological and step children. The majority of fathers and mothers (83%) described themselves as in a relationship together and between 53 – 62 % said they were living together.

The fathers' sentences ranged from ten months to five and a half years. The average time spent in prison was two years and six months. All the fathers were in contact with one or more of their children/step-children and were planning to maintain contact with them after release. They had been quite highly involved in their children's lives prior to the imprisonment (on a scale of one to

five, where five represented high involvement, the fathers and mothers rated their involvement on average between three and four). They were therefore a group of fathers who played an active role in the lives of their children.

The families were recruited via the fathers. Partners and ex-partners and children were contacted subsequently and invited to participate. The mothers, fathers and the majority of the children aged four and over were interviewed twice about their experiences. The first time was within four months of the father's release from prison, the second was up to six months after the father's return from prison. The semi-structured interviews collected qualitative and quantitative data on the families' relationships, social and economic circumstances, personal health and well-being and experiences during and after the father's prison sentence. The interviews with the children took place mostly in the home. Most children were interviewed alone although a few interviews with younger children took place with the mother or carer present. This was a limitation of the methodology for while some children may have found her company supportive and encouraging, others may have tempered their responses knowing she could hear.

A constructivist grounded approach was adopted for the data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This approach assumes that 'any theoretical rendering offers an interpretative portrayal of the studied world' (Charmaz, 2006, p.10) and allows for pre-existing theoretical scaffolding to be taken into account (Charmaz, 2005). The thematic analysis of the temporal, spatial and agentic dimensions of prisoners' children's well-being was developed from a constant

comparison of patterns, regularities and irregularities, contrasts, paradoxes in the data.

The following discussion is based primarily on the voices of the 35 children interviewed at Time 1 is supplemented by interview data from their parents. The 35 children were aged between 4 to 18 years. Five were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups and the rest were White British. Before prison 20 (57%) of these children were living with their father. After the prison sentence most of the families resumed the living arrangements they had before the father went to prison, but there were a few changes: two fathers moved to live with the mother and children, two fathers moved out and one father lived with the family part-time. Two fathers were returned to prison and two others were prevented from moving back with their children because of their licence conditions.

3 Findings

3.1 A temporal dimension to prisoners' children's well-being

Data collected during the father's imprisonment and after his release illustrated how knowledge of the child's former living conditions and perceptions of their lives in the past was critical for understanding their well-being in the present; children's lives prior to imprisonment shed light on their well-being whilst their father was in prison and children's well-being after his release could be understood in relation to how they had felt during his imprisonment.

All the children interviewed had memories of the time before the father left and were aware that he would be returning in the future. Around 80% of those

interviewed knew their father was in prison and all those aged seven years and over knew. For the majority of children during the father's imprisonment the past was remembered as a happier time: *'(I) feel sad with dad being away. Everything is different'* (Joe, 5). Significant family times, such as birthdays and Christmas were particularly difficult: *'I'm sad at birthdays because Dad's meant to be there but he's not'* (Leah, 16). Time passed slowly: *'It's been a long time'* (Steven, 7); *'I wish he'd come home quicker'* (Amy, 10). These children looked forward to their father's return: *'I will be happy and proud and excited'* (Tim, 5); *'(it will be) a really good life'* (Steven, 7). On the father's release they spoke of an improved well-being in comparison to the past: *'I am not as upset or angry as I used to be'* (Sara, 10); *'When he was away it was sad and quiet. Now it's fun and happy'* (Amy, 10).

A minority of children remembered a more stressful life before the prison sentence. The present, without the father, offered some respite from the arguments of before and there was a nervousness in their anticipation of his return ''(I'm) scare, worried' (Max, 11). Children in two families expressed hope that an alcohol problem would be resolved and life might be better after the father's release. In both cases, the fathers' continuing battles with alcohol on their return seemed all the more disappointing: *'he's embarrassing and I don't like everybody seeing him when he's drunk'* (Ben, 11).

These accounts reveal two broad and contrasting trajectories of well-being during the father's prison sentence. For the large majority of children, the past with the father was remembered positively, his absence was accompanied by sadness and or anger and his release signalled happier times. For a few

however, the father's imprisonment brought some respite from past troubles and an improvement to their sense of well-being and his release was associated with renewed times of stress, disappointment and unhappiness.

3.2 Spatial Perspectives

The children's narratives of well-being corresponded in diverse ways to the spaces they frequented; their father's imprisonment affected the number, type and quality of these spaces through his 'absent presence' or because of the reaction of others to his imprisonment.

For some children, the father's imprisonment meant that they went to places less often than before: '*We only come here when dad's here'* (Julia, 18). Often these were spaces associated with fun and leisure activities such as playing in the park, swimming or on special trips: '*We used to go outside our house … and we had a game of football'* (Lydia, 8); '*He takes us to nice places'* (Sara, 10).

Familiar spaces were altered. The father's physical absence *in the home* changed the feel of the space for the child. It was a constant reminder of the separation: '*He's not there when I wake up in the morning'* (Jake, 15). For some, the home had become a place of solace where comfort could be found: '*(When I'm sad) I go upstairs in my room'* (*Callum,* 8). ' *I tell my mum and have chocolate on bread and ask if I can go on the computer'* (Steven, 7)*; 'I go to the picture of Dad in our room and look at him and kiss it'* (Ellen, 8). For others it had become a place to avoid*: 'I try not to spend time here because it upsets me that dad's not there'* (Leah, 16). For a small group of children, however, the home during the father's imprisonment had become a place where they felt

more comfortable and less stressed as it had been the site of conflict between their parents: *'Now he doesn't live here there is no drinking, no arguments'* (Jessie, 13).

Some talked of home becoming a happier place when their father returned. Old routines were resumed: *'I like going downstairs with him early, watching TV, having milk and biscuits... with him'* (Tim, 5). But in other cases, interactions in the home were changed or less stable: *'I wish Dad wouldn't have to work at the weekend…he's always at work or football'* (Lydia, 8); *'He doesn't play with me much. He tells me off quite a lot…he gets grumpy and impatient, but can be fun'* (Laura, 7). Where a different routine had been established in his absence the father's return could leave some feeling displaced: *'When dad is back I get bored. He sleeps in mummy's bed'* (Steven, 7).

For some children, the home had become a more permeable and consequently less secure space, where outsiders could enter and take over. Three children in one family had been confined in the home by the police who had raided the house to arrest the father. They had to wait several hours until the mother returned. In another family, the mother said the police were regularly turning up to the house after the father's release and taking him away for what she told her son was a 'quick interview'.

The familiar space of *the school* also changed. For some children it had become riskier either because of its physical distance from emotional security: *'When my mum told me I cried and wouldn't leave my mum at school'* (Kayleigh, 7) or because of fears of adverse reactions from others to the father's

imprisonment: *'I don't talk to people at school, don't talk to teachers. I don't want anybody to get me into trouble'* (Lydia, 8). These fears were realised in some cases: *'They call me names, sometimes about my dad being in prison... Sometimes I get into fights* (Sam, 7)'; *'A girl saw it in the paper and told the whole school. Some people took the Mickey out of me as I haven't got a dad'* (Max, 11). For some children, however, there were individual members of staff at the school to whom they could turn for support: *'teachers are very understanding'* (Sara, 10); *'I told them … my head wasn't in right place and I didn't want to do badly'* (Julia, 18).

The new space of the prison generated mixed emotions. It could be a remote place associated with long tedious hours of travel. With its security procedures and large noisy and closely monitored visits halls it was seen by some children as a fearful and restrictive place, where there was little to do, where they might say something that could jeopardise their father's release and where the father had an unwelcome prisoner identity which was not *'like my Dad'* (Sara, 10). The space could impose constraints on relationships: on ordinary visits children and fathers had to stay seated around a table. Interactions with staff in the prison were unpredictable too. They could be associated with fun and play activities but they could also be unfriendly. The mother of the children who had been held in the house at the time of the father's arrest described a moment during a visit when an officer told her son: *'you'd better behave otherwise the policeman will take you away.'* Although he didn't know the circumstances, she felt that his words were *'still insensitive'*.

For other children, in contrast, the space of the prison was much less forbidding. Children's visits reproduced opportunities for physical closeness and play with their father: □*'He let's me sit on his lap'* (Marie, *6); '□I like it when he reads me a book' (Tom, 7); 'He plays with me, he plays football (Steven, 7).* As some fathers were transferred between prisons during their sentence with more or less family-friendly regimes, the children accumulated a mix of experiences which could be both positive and negative.

The father's imprisonment and subsequent release thus substantially affected children's geographies – it introduced new spaces, changed the frequency with which children visited others and in the short or long term altered the character of existing ones. Some spaces became less accessible and less often associated with fun and play. Other familiar spaces became temporarily or permanently riskier, less stable and supportive. Comfort and support might be found in different places to before the father's imprisonment. What affected the child's well-being in these spaces was not just the father's absence or renewed presence but also how others in those spaces, peers, teachers, prison officers with the knowledge of the father's offence interacted with the child. Some of these relationships, such as with the father, mother relatives and friends were clearly not space-bound; interactions took place across different spaces but were shaped differently by them.

3.3 Agency

A focus on children's agency revealed the strategies they employed to address the difficulties they faced. Some found ways of coping independently: *'I find games for iPod that make me feel happy' (Lydia, 8)*; *'I walk around the block to*

calm myself down' (Jessie, 13). Some sought out others for support: '*(When I am sad) I cry and stop and ring up dad' (Alicia, 10); 'I go and tell Mummy' (Elliott, 7)*; '*a friend has a dad at prison as well, so she knows how I feel' (Jessie, 13)*. Others suppressed or kept their concerns to themselves '*I try not to think about it'* (Callum, 8) *'I mostly keep it bottled inside. I don't think it helps to talk about it because it won't get him out any sooner'* (Leah, 16). Sometimes their options were limited: *' I have no one to talk to, I go on the computer'*(Peter,15).

The father's imprisonment combined with other constraints associated with being a child shaped their agency. In one family, the children had to catch the bus to different places while the father was in prison because he was the only one who could drive. This was a particular source of frustration for Tom (7) which was alleviated on his father's return: *'I'm very, very happy. I don't have to get the bus to football any more.'* The limitations placed on their agency could lead to frustration and anxiety: '*I'm bored that he's not here. I feel worried (*Sian, *6)*. They could also generate anger and resistance; Callum's mother described how he had started knocking things off the shelves in a local supermarket on the day his father went back to prison after home leave. The police were called and he shouted at them: *'I don't like you. You took my daddy away.'* Others felt that somehow they were to blame for what was going wrong in their lives: *'sometimes I think it's my fault that dad's away'(Sian, 6)*.

Although they didn't like their new situations (either during the father's imprisonment or on his return) some children spoke of adapting to it after a while: *'I was upset at first but then got used to it'* (Chris, 13). Over the period of

the father's absence some had become more independent which resulted in tensions on his return: *'Once I tried to make toast when I came home from school like I normally do and he shouted at me'* (Max, 11). Jake (15) liked the *'leading man role'* he had taken on during the father's absence and admitted it was hard on his return. He and his father had to negotiate a new way of interacting which involved compromises on both sides.

The children's data illustrate the interconnection between their agency and time and place. Their agency found different expression over time and was dependent on the boundaries and structural constraints of different situations. There was a qualitative difference, for example, between Steven who asked to go on the computer because it was a comforting activity and Peter who went on the computer because he had no one to talk to. As Sen (1985) has argued it is necessary to see how people's agency is bounded by the situations they are in in order to understand its relationship to their well-being.

Sen's theorising resonates with more recent writing on children's agency (e.g Oswell, 2013) which highlights the importance of a consideration of the structural influences on children's agency. Prisoners' children are subject to particular structural constraints generated by decision-makers in the criminal justice system who, for example, decide on the father's custodial sentence, his geographical location within the secure estate and the nature and frequency of the communication he is permitted to have with his children (which also depends on individual prison policies and assessments of the father's security level and behaviour). These multi-layered systemic influences represented a

shared and unique set of constraints on the agency of prisoners' children and have important broader implications for their quality of life.

4. An integrated framework for understanding well-being

Taken together the three dimensions of time, space and agency facilitate a nuanced and differentiated insight into the well-being of the children in the study. Two illustrations are described below.

When asked what he did when he was sad Luke explained in his first interview 'I just wait and wait for a long time for daddy to come back. I lie on the sofa'. Luke sought consolation in a space that was physically and psychologically comforting because it was associated with former happier memories of playing with his father but his actions also suggested he felt his life was 'in limbo' until his father came back. Luke did not know his father was in prison. He had been told he was working away. He was delighted when his father returned but when the possibility of a job arose a few hundred miles from home (a consequence of the challenges of finding employment with a criminal record), his mother said Luke had become very upset about the prospect of his father 'working away' again. Through his expression of distress Luke signalled that his sense of well-being was dependent on spatial closeness with his father.

At his first interview Ben had expressed negative feelings about his father's imprisonment: "*I feel sad, bored, sometimes angry that dad's not around.*' He looked forward to his release '*It will be better because …dad can go too to football matches and shopping.*' Ben's anticipation of a more positive future

was not realised when his father's alcohol problems resumed. His father's release was consequently associated with strong feelings of disappointment. Ben was also concerned about how his father's renewed presence would affect his friendships: *'I'm scared that I will see him somewhere when I'm with my friends'*. His way of coping was to protect his social spaces by keeping his father at a distance. He did not tell his father where he would be playing football, for example, so that he could not come and watch. He said *'now I just phone and text him sometimes'*.

The analytical focus on time, space and agency draws attention to similar and different effects of their father's imprisonment on Luke's and Ben's sense of well-being. The prison sentence had isolated both of them from someone they were close to and each found different ways of coping within the structural boundaries and with the resources available to them. The legacy of the father's imprisonment suggested a negative influence on the well-being of both (in the short term, at least) but for different reasons: in one case it was associated with disappointment, stress and embarrassment in the other it had generated an insecurity associated with losing contact with the father again.

Concluding Reflections

The children's narratives capture the immediacy of their sense of well-being during and after the father's imprisonment. The detail in their accounts reveals important differences in their experiences. Their well-being is dynamic; it changes over time. It is influenced by their experiences in the past and their anticipation of the future. It fluctuates according to the spaces they frequent,

by the physical and structural conditions that fashion these spaces and the social interactions that take place within them. The father's imprisonment affects these spaces through the emotional consequences of his physical absence or through the intangible but keenly felt effect of others' reactions to his sentence. How children cope is revealed through a study of their agency and how it is shaped by structural, material and social constraints.

A limitation of this research is that for some of the children's interviews mothers or carers were present which may have affected the authenticity of their responses. A second limitation is that the current study has focussed only on the experience of paternal imprisonment. An analysis of the relevance of these three dimensions for understanding children's well-being during a mother's imprisonment would be worthwhile.

The findings from this study suggest that in order to provide relevant support for prisoners' children during and after their parent's imprisonment, knowledge of their past and how they anticipate the future is critical for understanding their well-being in the present. It is also important to understand the changes to children's geographies during and after the imprisonment. Do they have access to the spaces that are important to them? Which spaces are safe, dangerous, comforting or distressing? Finally, knowledge of how children exercise their agency in different situations is informative for understanding their ability to cope with the parent's imprisonment. These insights are revealed by integrating individual and systemic perspectives; by understanding children's situated subjectivity and how it is affected by structural, social and material

constraints. One of these constraints may be the designation of 'prisoner's child' and a question for further reflection is: to what extent and for how long is it helpful for children to be defined in relation to their father's imprisonment?

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